

# *The Germany that I Know*

By Gerrit Book

Mr. Book was born in the former West Germany in the 1970s. Now living in Berlin, he is an accomplished guide and interpreter, fluent in both English and Chinese. Under contract with the Goethe Institut, Mr. Book assisted in the organization of two Idaho Education Missions to Germany – during which Idaho teachers and administrators met with German government officials, visited schools, and explored Idaho's cultural connections.

Germany today is an open, peaceful, democratic, diverse, vivid and lively country. We have a high standard of living, an excellent social security system, a highly developed civic society, utilize the latest technology, and try to safeguard our environment. We are also world champions in exports.

Germany is beautiful. It has a tremendous landscape of ocean and mountains, open grasslands and deep forests – and a blending of old and modern cities. It is the largest country in Europe - with a history that includes some of the most important writers, composers, scientists and philosophers in the world.

Yet, Germany today is also a country with economic problems, high unemployment, an expensive social network, and has a society that is growing older and older - and having fewer and fewer children. Consequently, Germany is a country in reform - which is, and will continue to be, painful. It's a country with vast differences between the richer west and the poorer east, and generally a poorer north and a richer south. It's also the European country with the lowest economic growth and with almost the greatest national debt.

It also has a long and dark history. Some of the cruellest people in the world lived in Germany; they also developed some of the most inhumane social systems. .

When I was born in the beginning of the 1970s, Germany – or I had better say, West Germany, because I was born in a little town close to Bremen – had completely recovered from the Second World War. The economy was growing at a high rate and the West German model of a social market economy seemed to be a never-ending success story. Though the

student movements of late sixties were already over, they had deeply changed German society. It was a time when we began to ask more questions about our history, in particular about the Third Reich. We started to deal with our own personal history and children began asking their parents what they knew and what they had done during that period in our country.

I still remember Sunday afternoons when my mother and her brothers and sisters were asking my grandpa about his life during the Third Reich. Most of the time he shared a few stories, but eventually he wrote an autobiography. I think he wrote it to prove that he had done what was right. On one hand, he was very conservative and nationalistic, so I can't believe that he was against Hitler or the national policy right from the beginning. On the other hand, he was Catholic, had very strong values, and was a husband and father of three children. So, he tried to deal with and oppose the system at the same time – while still attempting to care for the people under his responsibility. He was a doctor - a psychiatrist - and as such was involved in the government, whether he wanted to or not. To escape from the government, he first applied to work as a doctor in an ordinary prison and was later sent to work in a prisoner-of-war camp in Poland. In the 1980s he was honoured by a little city in Poland for his humanitarian work during the war.

It doesn't matter if people were in favour or against the Nazis, almost everyone was somehow involved in the political system and stories like my grandpa's can be found in one way or another in almost every German family. Still, not everyone wanted to talk about that period in our country.

By the end of the 1970s West Germany began to change. After the oil crisis, economic growth slowed and unemployment rose. Simultaneously, the development of environmental pollution occurred and the vast availability of energy seemed to come to an end. An atomic threat loomed large. Germany was a potential battlefield in an atomic war between the Western and Eastern blocks.

Scientists told us that if we would not change our way of life by the year 2000, life would no longer exist in the way we knew it. So the 1980s became a time dedicated to environmental protection and peace. Things got better, much better - the air and rivers are cleaner; there is less waste of our natural and energy resources.

In 1989 – suddenly the wall collapsed and the world seemed to be very peaceful.

I still remember the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down - my family and I were sitting in front of the TV watching the people crossing from East into West Berlin; we were crying. We couldn't believe what was happening. I had never imagined the possibility that reunification was a real option; it had just been a theory. Prior to 1989, East Germany had been far, far away from me; probably the moon was closer.

We had relatives in the East, but we never went to visit them and they were not allowed to visit us. I knew them only by the photographs and the Christmas and Easter parcels that my grandma sent them. The information we received about East Germany was more or less propaganda portrayed by the West German media. Most people in the East had access to West German TV, so they got to know at least something about the West. But East German TV was not available in the West.

Only after reunification did I get to know my relatives. While attending the university in Berlin I had classmates from the east. We figured out that daily life had not been so different for most people in the West and East. Of course, the West was wealthier and we had more freedom, but the daily routines, the little fears and challenges people encounter were not so very different. The media had exaggerated on both sides of the wall – propaganda.

However, because of the fast collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), we got to know the truth about life in East Germany. We hadn't known before how the dictatorship had really worked, how the government had spied and oppressed its own people.

Reunification is still occurring, and sometimes there is still a gap between people in the West and East based on the different backgrounds that developed when Germany was divided.

In the new millennium, things have changed again - especially after 9/11. New threats occurred and we felt great sympathy, solidarity and support for the Americans after the attacks. Over several days and into several weeks, Berliners brought flowers and candles to the American embassy – holding demonstrations to show their feelings towards the Americans.

Yet, when the American Government planned to attack Iraq - public opinion changed. Most Germans were, and are, against the war. So now peace demonstrations were targeted against the American government and its foreign policy, not against the American people. As a country in the middle of Europe, we know and felt the impact of war.

However, in the fight against terrorism, Germany is involved in Afghanistan and in other international actions. In Germany we are facing problems with our migrant population, especially the Muslim population. We have discovered that not done enough had been done to integrate them into German society, so we're looking for new ways to open dialogue and support for integration. But all in all, our growing migrant population and we Germans live very peacefully together.

Germany today is a country where people mostly deal openly and critically with the past, address today's problems, and attempt to identify good solutions for the future. The Germany that I know is an open, democratic and peaceful country.